

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET



Rabies

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 150 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02111

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease of the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) that is almost always fatal. Rabies in humans is very rare in the U.S., but rabies in ground animals — especially wildlife — is common in some parts of the country. Rabies has infected ground animals in Massachusetts after 40 years of being found only in bats.

How is rabies spread?

The rabies virus lives in the saliva (spit) and other body fluids of infected animals and is spread when they bite or scratch. The virus can also be spread if one of these body fluids touches broken skin or a mucous membrane (in the mouth, nose or eyes). In caves crowded with bats, it is possible to inhale the virus floating in the air.

What kinds of animals spread rabies?

The rabies virus can infect any mammal (if it has hair or fur, it's a mammal), but it is only common among certain ones like bats, skunks, foxes and raccoons. Cats, dogs and livestock can also get rabies — and spread it to their owners — if they do not have special shots to protect them. Rabies is very rare among rodents like squirrels, rats, mice and chipmunks. Birds, fish, snakes, lizards, turtles, and insects (bugs) cannot spread rabies.

How common is animal rabies in Massachusetts?

Until recently, rabies was rare in this state. However, rabies in raccoons first appeared in Massachusetts in September 1992 and is spreading quickly.

How can you tell if an animal is rabid?

Rabid animals often behave strangely after the virus attacks their brains. Rabid animals may attack people or other animals for no real reason, or they may lose their fear of people and seem to be unnaturally friendly. Not all rabid animals act this way, however, so you should avoid all wild animals — especially bats, skunks, foxes and raccoons. Also, you should not feed or touch stray cats and dogs.

What should you do if you think you have been exposed to rabies?

If you have been bitten or scratched by a stray or wild animal, or by a pet or farm animal that has been behaving oddly, follow these steps:

1. Wash the wound with soap and water **right away** for at least five minutes.
2. Call your local board of health and your doctor, nurse or health center as soon as you finish washing. They will help you decide if you need to be treated for rabies. Follow their instructions to the letter.
3. Contact your local animal control officer to catch or find the animal that scratched or bit you. Your local board of health can tell you how to get it tested by the State Rabies Lab.
4. If your pet has been bitten or scratched by an animal you think might be rabid, wear gloves to touch it. Follow the steps above but call your pet's veterinarian instead of your own doctor in step 2.

What is the treatment for people exposed to rabies?

People who have never had rabies shots are given six shots over the course of a month. (Rabies shots are no longer given in the belly.) One shot is antibodies to fight the virus, and the rest are vaccine to ensure long-lasting protection. To work best, the shots should begin as soon after the bite or scratch as possible. However, if the animal has been caught and can be tested for rabies, some doctors wait for the test results to see if the shots are really needed.

How can you prevent rabies?

- Avoid wild animals, especially bats, skunks, foxes and raccoons. Do not feed or pet strays. Avoid any animal — wild, farm or pet — that you do not know. Report any animal that behaves oddly to your local animal control official.
- Make sure your pets are vaccinated against rabies and that their shots are up to date. By law, all dogs and cats must be vaccinated against rabies.
- Feed pets indoors and keep them indoors at night. If they are outside during the day, keep them on a leash or fenced in so they cannot wander. Even vaccinated pets can get rabies. Pets allowed to roam freely are more likely to get rabies and bring it into your home.
- Fasten trash can lids tightly. Garbage attracts animals (like skunks, raccoons and strays) looking for an easy meal.
- Teach your children to avoid wildlife, strays, and all other animals they don't know well. Do not let your children roam freely in areas where wild animals live.
- It is against state law to keep wild animals such as skunks, ferrets or raccoons as pets. There are no rabies vaccines for most wild species.
- Cap your chimney with screens and block openings in attics, cellars and porches to keep wild animals like bats and raccoons out of your home.
- If you have bats in your house, talk to a professional about bat-proofing your home.
- Do not handle dead, sick, or injured wild animals yourself; call the police or animal control officer. If you must handle the animal, use heavy gloves, sticks or other tools to avoid direct contact.
- Animal control officers, veterinarians and their assistants, and others who have a lot of contact with strays or wildlife should think about getting routine rabies vaccinations to protect themselves before they are exposed to the virus.

Where can you get more information?

Your doctor, nurse, or health center

Your local board of health

Listed in the telephone book under local government

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Division of Epidemiology (617) 522-3700, x420 or x425

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